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Acts of hostility and violence targeting Jehovah's Witnesses denounced at the OSCE

HRWF (27.11.2024) - At the last annual OSCE conference on human rights in Warsaw, Jehovah's Witnesses filed a report about public hostility targeting their community in Norway. Here are some excerpts of it:

Physical and verbal assaults

On 4 February 2024. (Oslo) Outside a Kingdom Hall (Bjørnerudveien 20), an unknown man in a car confronted a Witness who was going to drive home after a meeting. The man got out of his car, prevented the Witness from leaving, and spat on his car.

On 23 January 2024. (Horten) One or two men with air guns shot at a Kingdom Hall where some 100 of Jehovah's Witnesses were attending a religious meeting. The police were notified, and armed officers immediately came to investigate. The officers went to a suspect's home and confiscated at least two air guns. A similar incident had occurred in October 2023.

On 19 October 2023. (Kristiansand) A man forced open the main entrance door to one of the Witnesses' Kingdom Halls (places of worship) and threatened those in attendance. The police arrived shortly after the incident and filed a report. The same perpetrator had previously carried out religiously motivated hate attacks against Jehovah's Witnesses. (See October 16-19 entry, above.)

On 16-19 October 2023. (Kristiansand) A man attacked a mobile stand with Bible-based literature belonging to Jehovah's Witnesses, overturning it and punching a male Witness in the arm. The incident was reported to the police. The next day, the same man attacked two mobile carts with Bible-based literature while shouting obscenities at two female Witnesses.

He threw one of the carts at a car driving by and the other at a parked van, damaging both vehicles. The incident was reported to the police.

The following day, the same perpetrator attacked carts with Bible-based literature, knocking over one cart and kicking the other, almost hitting a little girl and her father who were walking nearby. The incident was reported to the police. The perpetrator received

a restraining order, but later the cases were dismissed

On 9 October 2023. (Kristiansand) A man shouted hate speech as he walked past two female Witnesses who were standing beside mobile display carts with Bible-based literature. Subsequently, the man returned and threw the carts across the pavement, scattering the literature. The incident was reported to the police.

In September 2023. (Hjartdal) Two of Jehovah's Witnesses were sharing their faith with others when a bystander became aggressive. The Witnesses tried to calm the man down, but he seized one of them by the neck, trying to choke him. The Witnesses calmly appealed to the man, and he eventually let go. The incident was not reported to the police.

Vandalism

On 23 September 2023. (Oslo) Outside a Kingdom Hall (Bjørnerudveien 20), several stickers with slanderous accusations such as "Jehovah's Witnesses protect pedophiles" were fixed to lampposts.

In September - October 2023. (Kristiansand) On three occasions, unknown individuals broke into the Kingdom Hall. They overturned chairs, shelves, cupboards, tables, and the lectern. Mobile carts with Bible-based literature were thrown down the stairs, and a chair in the hallway was smashed.

All the incidents were reported to the police.

On 28 May 2024, an unknown person posted offensive signs with defamatory accusations about child sex abuse outside the same Kingdom Hall.

Anti-cult associations

Hjelpekilden, an anti-cult association, describes itself as an organization that provides "assistance to people from closed or strict religious environments." Of eight directors, at least three have a history of attacking Jehovah's Witnesses. The media often contacts this organization when writing articles about the Witnesses. The General Manager of Hjelpekilden testified as a State Witness when the Oslo District Court upheld the 2022 decision by the County Governor of Østfold, Buskerud, Oslo and Akershus, to revoke the legal registration of Jehovah's Witnesses in Norway.

As a member of Frivillighet Norge, Hjelpekilden receives financial support from public funds. The association is also affiliated with the umbrella organization Council for Mental Health.

Hostile fake news

On 12 March 2024. The newspaper *Dagen* published an article accusing Jehovah's Witnesses of unlawfully sending large sums of money out of the country.

A member of Parliament, Mr. Abid Raja, stated that an investigation should be conducted.

Minister of Children and Families, Ms. Kjersti Toppe, later concluded that "there is no reason to believe that the Jehovah's Witnesses have transferred grants received under the Religious Communities Act, abroad." She further explained: "Jehovah's Witnesses' accounts for the above-mentioned (and previous years) have been audited by a state-authorized auditor, and that the County Governor shall have verified that the Jehovah's

Witnesses have used the grants in accordance with the requirements of the Religious Communities Act.”

New preaching ban makes schools anxious to break the law

What about Christmas at school?

By Joe-Lize Kruijsse-Brugge

[CNE News](#) (26.11.2024) - Is it good for a school to take their pupils to church in the Christmas season? In Norway, this has been done for ages. But after a new school law was implemented, there is fear whether this is illegal. “The real question is, what is preaching?”

Public schools in Trondheim were surprised with a letter last week. The municipal head of education, Svein Johny Forren, wrote that going to a church service with pupils was no longer allowed, [Adresseavisen](#) writes.

The background of the e-mail is a [change](#) in the Education Act of Norway last August. The Education Law now explicitly [forbids](#) preaching in schools.

The ban applies to all subjects in primary and secondary education. Earlier, a preaching ban only applied to the subject of religion (KRLE), which is supposed to teach pupils about all the major world religions.

Church

However, the new law leaves no room for exceptions, sources in Norway argue. Thus, they believe that going to church for educational purposes would not be allowed anymore either. Christian Lomsdalen, chairman of the Human-Ethical Association (HEF), shares this opinion with education leader Forren. Lomsdalen writes in an [opinion article](#) that organising a school service is a violation of the legal ban. “There are no provisions in §14-5 that allow for exceptions to this prohibition, not even for school services.”

And the Church of Norway itself said that a school service is the same as preaching, [Dagen](#) writes.

In response, several schools decided last week to cancel the church services they had already planned for Christmas, [Vart Land](#) reports. Inger Sagen Hasselø, principal of the Huseby primary school in Trondheim, explained that the reason for the cancellation of the school is the letter from the head of the school, also mentioned above.

Celebration

However, the Norwegian Minister of Education, Kari Nessa Nordtun, quickly clarified to [Vart Land](#) that school services are not part of the ban and therefore still allowed. “Schools have the opportunity to offer school services to pupils who wish to participate”, she emphasised.

"Christmas celebration and the traditions associated with it are important to many people, including many who do not consider themselves Christians. It's nice that the students both learn about Christmas and traditions and that everyone gets to experience community and enjoyment around activities you do together." According to the Minister, it is up to the individual school to decide how Christmas should be celebrated.

In an earlier written [statement](#), the Minister wrote that learning about Christmas "both as a Christian holiday and as a common cultural heritage" is important.

"I am happy that many pupils are offered to join the church before Christmas and that new generations get to take part in traditions such as the Lucia celebration, Christmas decorations, and carols. It is a strong wish from many students and parents. It is also important for students, regardless of background and religion, to learn about and experience, understand and learn traditions that are important in Norway."

At the same time, schools are obliged to organise an alternative activity for students who do not want to join a church service. This activity must also be aimed at teaching pupils about culture and traditions. According to the Minister, the possibility of opting out is necessary to guarantee the pupils' freedom of religion.

After this response, Kjell Ingolf Ropstad from the Christian Democratic Party, [called](#) the campaign of the Human Ethical Association against school services "nothing but disinformation." He pleads for a strengthening of the church's position in "our common cultural history."

Decision

A day after the first letter from the Trondheim municipality, a second letter was sent out by the special city councillor for education. In it, she rectified the first letter saying that Christmas services are allowed if certain [conditions](#) are met. One of these requirements is that a Christmas service should not be used to mark the end of Christmas.

However, principal Inger Sagen Hasselø does not reconsider her decision. "That message reached us a little late. The municipality must give us a clearer message if we are to change the practice again", she clarified.

Misunderstanding

The problem with this new law is that no one really knows what preaching is, says Audun Raen, General Secretary of the [Kristne Friskolers Forbund](#) (KFF), the umbrella organisation for private schools in Norway. "Every school contains preaching", he states in an interview with CNE.news.

If you attended a science class in a public school, you would hear preaching too, Raen asserts. "You will learn how the world developed itself without God. That is also a type of preaching, even though no one calls it that. If we teach about the origins of the earth and include God in our lesson, then all of a sudden, it is preaching. I think that the government misunderstands what it exactly means by preaching. You will always have it in some form in education."

Despite this unclarity, Raen does not see schools ending up in court soon for organising a school service. He thinks that the words of the Minister offer schools a legal protection, as "it is the interpretation of the law." In addition, he notes that teachers in Norway are already very careful to leave out faith in the classroom. "Even Christian teachers in public schools keep their mouth closed as they are afraid of saying anything wrong."

Subject

Christian schools do not have to worry about the changes in the Education Law, Raen adds. They do not have to comply with this act, as they fall under the Private Schools Law. And right now, there is no "preaching ban" in that act.

That could always change, but Raen does not see any signs of that happening soon. "The idea of private schools is that they are quite different from the public schools. Therefore, Christian schools must be Christian to be allowed to exist. Therefore, our schools have an obligation to teach Christianity as a subject."

Christian education in Norway

In Norway, there are about 150 Christian schools. Most of them have a membership with the [Kristne Friskolers Forbund](#), the umbrella organisation for Christian schools. Christian education in Norway consists of primary schools, secondary schools, upper secondary and even vocational schools. In total, there are about 16,000 pupils and students that attend a Christian school.

Christian education is allowed in the country, and teachers can pray with their students. The schools fall under the Private School Act, which even explicitly specifies that a private school approved on religious grounds must teach that religion in school.

However, in 2023, the Private School Act was tightened with a new regulation that gives municipalities a great say in whether a private school is allowed to be started. If the local authorities say no, this opinion is followed most of the time.

According to Audun Raen, General Secretary of KFF, this makes it much harder to start a Christian school. "It really depends on how liberal the local authorities are."

Declassification and discrimination of Jehovah's Witnesses

Oral statement of the Dutch branch of Human Rights Without Frontiers at the OSCE Warsaw Human Dimension Conference

HRWF (08.10.2024) - *Mensenrechten Zonder Grenzen Nederland* is deeply concerned about a decision in Norway which arbitrarily revoked the registration of Jehovah's

Witnesses present in the country for over 130 years. This measure puts an end to their eligibility for state grants they had received for 30 years.

The registration of the Norwegian Jehovah's Witnesses as a religious organization for 39 years was put to an end on unclear and controversial grounds in 2022.

In addition, on 4 March of this year, the Oslo District Court upheld the decisions of the County Governor of Oslo and Viken who has denied Jehovah's Witnesses state subsidies since 2021. The financial loss is estimated at 1.6 million EUR for 2021. An appeal has been lodged.

We recommend that the Government of Norway

- cancel the discriminatory decision to remove the registration of Jehovah's Witnesses as a religious community;
- reconsider and reverse the denial of state grants since 2021;
- abide by their commitment to uphold fundamental freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution of Norway, the ICCPR and the European Convention on Human Rights for all citizens, including Jehovah's Witnesses.

State subsidies in Norway are not a gift. The Lutheran Church of Norway which is a state church is financially supported by the government and gets state subsidies proportional to the number of its members. For the sake of coherence and non-discrimination, the Constitution mandates that other religions should also benefit from the same financing system and get subsidies in proportion of the number of their members. Over 700 religious communities receive such state grants in Norway, including Orthodox parishes subordinated to Patriarch Kirill of Moscow who blessed Russia's war on Ukraine.

The Russian Orthodox Church still financed by the State despite security concern

Concern mounts about the increasing purchase of properties by the Russian Orthodox Church near military sites in Norway, which poses security issues

By Willy Fautré, director of *Human Rights Without Frontiers*



Celebrating the 25th anniversary this year of Saint Irina, the parish of the Moscow Patriarchate in the Stavanger area. From Facebook.

[European Times](#) (15.09.2024) - In recent years, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in Norway has acquired properties next to military bases, which has been a source of concern since the beginning of Putin's war on Ukraine.

[More than 700 religious communities](#) receive state grants in Norway, including Orthodox parishes subordinated to Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and all Rus' who blessed Russia's war on Ukraine.

Purchase of properties

In 2017-2021, a number of properties were purchased by the ROC in the coastal area of Rogalan.

According to cadastral data, the ROC bought in 2017 a building in the town of Sherrey (Bergen community), located on a hill three kilometers away from Haakonsværn, which offers a view onto the main base of the Royal Norwegian Navy and the largest naval base in the Nordic area. Before the acquisition of this house, the religious community was located in the city center. The [Orthodox priest in Bergen, Dimitry Ostanin](#), is Ukrainian and was appointed by Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Rus' in 2008 when the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) was fully subordinated to him. Before that, he had served in Kaliningrad and Smolensk (Russia).

In the town of Stavanger, the former priest of the local community of the Russian Orthodox Church has a property near the NATO Joint Warfare Centre (JWC) in Jatta, according to [Dagbladet](#). It is located just one kilometer away from an important military building, about fifteen minutes' walk. That NATO Centre celebrated its 20th anniversary during a formal ceremony on 26 October 2023. Over the last two decades, the JWC has planned and delivered more than 100 exercises and training events and ensure that NATO's commanders and their staffs are well-prepared and ready to respond to any mission, whenever and wherever the call may come.

The Russian Orthodox Church also has a parish in Trondheim. On 21 March 2021, [the first Orthodox service](#) in the city was celebrated for almost a thousand years as part of the celebrations of the feast of the Triumph of Orthodoxy at the parish of the Holy Princess Anna of Novgorod, in Russia. News of this important event in the life of Orthodox Christians in Norway was shown on the Russian The Saviour and Unity TV channels.

In 2015, the Russian Orthodox Church also bought a property in Kirkenes (Finnmark county) in the far north-east of Norway, on the border with Russia.

In addition, the Moscow Patriarchate sponsors work in [Tromsø](#) in northern Norway and in Svalbard, also known as Spitzbergen.

In 1996, the Moscow Patriarchate established [a parish in Oslo](#). Among all Orthodox Churches in Norway, [the parish of St. Olga](#) in Oslo, is currently the largest one; another parish under the Moscow Patriarchate in the capital city is [Saint Hallvard](#).

The presence of Orthodox Churches subordinated to the Russian Orthodox Church/ Moscow Patriarchate in EU countries has also raised national security concerns because in a number of cases they were suspected or accused of serving as relays for Putin's propaganda or Russia's spying activities. [Czechia](#), [Estonia](#), [Lithuania](#), [Sweden](#) and [Ukraine](#) have taken various measures to anticipate or tackle security risks, including with the assistance of the Patriarchate of Constantinople.

In Norway, an Orthodox parish dedicated to St. Nicholas under the Patriarchate of Constantinople was founded in Oslo in 1931 by a small group of Russian refugees who fled the Bolshevik Revolution.

In light of security threats attributed to the Russian Orthodox Church/ Moscow Patriarchate in several European countries, the ROC in Norway remains registered and surprisingly continues to receive state grants. One can wonder why Norway is so laxist with this security issue. Voluntary blindness or lack of political will or both?

Jehovah's Witnesses arbitrarily deregistered but not the Russian Orthodox Church. Why?

Concern also mounts about the Russian Orthodox Church's increasing purchase of properties near military sites in Norway, which poses security issues.

By Willy Fautré,

[Bitter Winter](#) (11.09.2024) - On 4 March 2024, the Oslo District Court [ruled against the Jehovah's Witnesses](#) and upheld previous decisions of the government and the State Administrator of Oslo and Viken who arbitrarily revoked the registration of Jehovah's Witnesses present in Norway for over 130 years and put an end to their eligibility for state grants they had received for 30 years.

The reason was the shunning policy of the movement, a teaching recommending that its members do not associate with those who have been excluded from the community as unrepentant of serious sins, or have publicly left it and act against it out of disgruntlement. In this matter, Norway's judgment [runs counter to dozens of decisions](#) on shunning by jurisdictions in other countries, including supreme courts.

Legal experts and scholars in religious studies in Norway and abroad agree that their deregistration is arbitrary and is based on ill-founded grounds. They also stress that the decision will have a “stigmatizing effect” on the association and its members while the community will lose inter alia its right to celebrate legal marriages with civil effects, which may be considered discriminatory.

Jehovah’s Witnesses have been state-recognized as a religious organization in Norway since 1985 and no criminal case could be invoked to take such a radical decision as their sudden deregistration leading to the loss of approximately 1.6 million EUR every year. An appeal has been lodged.

The legal dimension of the court decision has been extensively analyzed and criticized by Massimo Introvigne and the undersigned in [“Bitter Winter”](#) and [“Religion News Service”](#).

State subsidies in Norway are not a gift. The Lutheran Church of Norway, which is a state church, is supported by the government with transfers of money proportional to the number of its members. For the sake of coherence and non-discrimination, the Constitution mandates that to respect the principle of equality other religions should receive the same proportional subsidies. [More than 700 religious communities](#) receive state grants in Norway, including Orthodox parishes subordinated to Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and all Rus’ who blessed Russia’s war on Ukraine.

Are Jehovah’s Witnesses more dangerous than another religious entity of foreign origin registered in Norway since 1996 and eligible to state subsidies, the Russian Orthodox Church?

In recent years, the Orthodox Church of Russia has acquired properties in Norway next to military bases, which has been a source of concern since the beginning of Putin’s war on Ukraine. In 2017–2021, some properties were acquired by the Russian Orthodox Church in the coastal area of Rogalan.

According to cadastral data, the Orthodox Church of Russia purchased in 2017 a building in the town of Sherrey (Bergen community), located on a hill three kilometers from Haakonsværn, which offers a view onto the main base of the Royal Norwegian Navy and the largest naval base in the Nordic area. Before the acquisition of this house, the religious community was located in the city center. The [Orthodox priest in Bergen, Dimitry Ostanin](#), is Ukrainian and was appointed by Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Rus’ in 2008 when the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) was fully subordinated to him. Before that, he had served in Kaliningrad and Smolensk.

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Princess Anna of Novgorod, in Russia. News of this important event in the life of Orthodox Christians in Norway was shown on the Russian The Saviour and Unity TV channels.

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The presence of Orthodox Churches subordinated to the Russian Orthodox Church/ Moscow Patriarchate in EU countries has raised national security concerns because in a number of cases they were suspected or accused of serving as relays for Putin's propaganda or Russia's spying activities.

[Czechia](#), [Estonia](#), [Lithuania](#), [Sweden](#) and [Ukraine](#) have taken various measures to anticipate or tackle security risks, including with the assistance of the Patriarchate of Constantinople.

In Norway, a historical Orthodox parish dedicated to St. Nicholas under the Patriarchate of Constantinople was founded in Oslo in 1931 by a small group of Russian refugees who fled the Bolshevik Revolution.

In the light of security threats attributed to the Russian Orthodox Church/ Moscow Patriarchate in several European countries, the deregistration in Norway of the peaceful and law-abiding movement of Jehovah's Witnesses as a state-recognized religious association appears as discriminatory. It is even more understandable with regard to Oslo's inaction towards the Russian Orthodox Church, which remains registered and goes on receiving state grants. Certainly the Jehovah's Witnesses do not deserve less than that.

Norway arms police due to threats against Muslims

[Anadolou Agency World](#) (09.04.2024) - Police in Norway have decided to arm on-duty officers following threats made against the Muslim community, local media reported Monday.

The decision by the director general of police applies to officers throughout the country and came into effect on Saturday, said a statement released over the weekend.

Threats were made against mosques in the Nordic country, police spokesman Roar Hansen was quoted as saying by local media.

The move comes ahead of Eid al-Fitr celebrations this week marking the end of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan.

Norwegian police do not generally carry arms, but due to the threats, the police director general "has decided to arm police on a national level from today," the statement said.

In August 2019, 21-year-old Philip Manshaus opened fire on the Al Noor Islamic center in Baerum, a suburb of Oslo.

He wounded one person and was then restrained by Muslim worshippers.

Prior to the attack, he killed his adopted stepsister at their home and posted messages online praising the Christchurch mosque shooter, the Poway synagogue shooter and the El Paso shooter, who targeted Latinos.

Manshaus was sentenced to 21 years in prison in June 2020.

A total of 51 Muslims were killed and 40 were injured at Masjid al-Noor and the Linwood Islamic Centre in Christchurch, New Zealand during Friday prayers on March 15, 2019 in a terrorist attack committed by Australian white supremacist Brenton Tarrant.

Norwegian Anders Behring Breivik, a neo-Nazi who on July 22, 2011 killed 77 people in a bombing and shooting rampage, is widely referred to as a fanatic who was driven by a hatred of Islam and Muslims.

In a 1,500-page document, Breivik devoted 700 pages to attacking the Muslim religion.

Why the Oslo district court decision against Jehovah's Witnesses is wrong

It claims that the practice of shunning illegally prevents adults and minors from leaving the religious organization. This claim is false.

By Massimo Introvigne

[Bitter Winter](#) (07.03.2024) - On March 4, 2024, the Oslo District Court ruled against the Jehovah's Witnesses and upheld the decisions of the government and the State Administrator of Oslo and Viken who denied the Jehovah's Witnesses the state subsidies they had peacefully received for thirty years based on Section 16 of the Norwegian Constitution ("All religious and philosophical communities must be supported on an equal footing"). Registration as a religious organization of the Norwegian Jehovah's Witnesses under Law No. 31 of April 24, 2020, was also denied.

The District Court is aware that this was a difficult decision with serious consequences. It observes that at least, under Law No. 31 the lack of registration would not prevent the Norwegian Jehovah's Witnesses to continue their activities and to teach what they teach everywhere in the world (except in a few totalitarian countries that have banned them, including Russia). The consequences of the non-registration are that they will not be eligible for state subsidies, nor will they be able to celebrate legally valid marriages.

State subsidies in Norway are not a gift. Since the Church of Norway, a Lutheran denomination, is a state church supported by the government with transfers of money

proportional to the number of its members, the Constitution mandates that to respect the principle of equality other religions should receive the same proportional subsidies. The judge himself acknowledges that not being able to celebrate legal marriages within one's religious community may be perceived as discriminatory. He also agrees that the decision may have a broader "stigmatizing effect."

Yet, the judge believes that all these admittedly important factors "are not weighty enough" when compared to the fact that the Jehovah's Witnesses, by practicing shunning, violate in his opinion their members' freedom to change their religion. Shunning is the Jehovah's Witnesses' teaching recommending that members do not associate with those who have been disassociated as unrepentant of serious sins or have publicly disassociated themselves from the organization (as opposed to simply becoming inactive). Cohabiting relatives are not shunned, although they are excluded from the family's religious activities.

Here, I find the decision slightly confusing. At times, it seems that the judge regards the shunning both of adult and minor ex-members as grounds for his decision. In other passages, however, he seems to acknowledge that Law no. 31 includes a note that "if adult members of their own free will follow rules that restrict their rights and freedoms, they cannot be considered violations... Essentially, this also applies even if the obligations can be considered harmful." In its conclusion, the decision cautiously focuses on the alleged violation of the "right to opt out" of children.

The decision notes that the European Convention on Human Rights also guarantees the right to leave a religious organization. The judge is persuaded that Jehovah's Witnesses in practice are prevented from leaving since they know that, if they leave, they will be shunned.

As mentioned earlier, it is at times unclear whether in the end the objection only concerns the shunning of minors or also extends to adults. In the second case, the decision is patently absurd and [runs counter to dozens of decisions](#) on shunning by jurisdictions in other countries, including supreme courts. They have noted that religious organizations have the right to self-organize themselves as they deem fit. Christian groups also have the right to interpret the Bible in their own way. The interpretation by the Jehovah's Witnesses in this case is not even particularly original. Clearly, something similar to the shunning they practice today is taught in 1 Corinthians 5:13 ("Expel the wicked person from among you") and 5:11 ("Do not even eat with such people"), and 2 John 10-11 ("Do not take them into your house or welcome them. Anyone who welcomes them shares in their wicked work"). Others may suggest a non-literal interpretation of these passages, but it is not for secular courts of law to second-guess religious organizations on their interpretation of the Bible.

The main objection is, however, another. All human organizations have what sociologists call exit costs. By leaving a demanding but well-paid job I may gain more freedom but lose a good salary. The loss of the salary is my exit cost. Shunning is a typical exit cost. A spouse that decides unilaterally to divorce and to marry a different partner may be shunned by the abandoned ex-spouse, perhaps even by children. Members of a political party who quit and join a political organization with the opposite ideology may be shunned as traitors by their former comrades. Several religions, including Islam and branches of ultra-orthodox Judaism, treat "apostates" in a less charitable way than the Jehovah's Witnesses.

The Norwegian judge's argument is that to avoid the exit costs we are compelled to remain in a religious organization we may no longer believe in and are thus denied our right to leave it that is enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights. But by applying the same argument, one can argue that marriage or political parties are also institutions that violate the rights of those who want to divorce or change political affiliation, since the exit costs may make them reluctant to leave.

Sociologists know that eliminating exit costs is not possible. They are an unavoidable feature of organized social life. Sometimes, one has the impression that the enemies of the Jehovah's Witnesses are precisely asking courts of law to compel those who do not want to communicate with their former co-religionists to do it, which is not only unfair but impossible. More often, opponents argue that what they want is that judges would prevent the organization of the Jehovah's Witnesses from teaching shunning. But that would put the judges in the strange position of interpreting 1 Corinthians and 2 John and substitute their opinion to the one of a religious organization in determining what these venerable Biblical texts "really" mean.

In the end, the Oslo judge found it safer to focus on minors who are first baptized and then, if they become unrepentant sinners, shunned. One can measure the cultural distance of the judge's own feelings from those of any conservative religious group, not only the Jehovah's Witnesses, when he wrote that he finds it "reasonable to expect" that most minors would engage in "sexual relations with their boyfriends or girlfriends." Apart from the cultural problems of the judge in understanding conservative religion, he accepts the opinion of an "apostate" ex-member that minors are baptized and become Jehovah's Witnesses when they are not mature enough to understand their obligations. But surely this is a drastic conclusion one cannot arrive at on the basis of one witness or a few anecdotal examples. What would be required is a quantitative study of those baptized as minors. Nothing similar is quoted in the decision. Although Norway has introduced a system of "youth punishment" with more lenient penalties for them, minors can be tried from criminal offenses from age 15. If they are mature enough in Norway to stand a trial before a criminal court, perhaps they are also mature enough to make informed religious decisions.

Once they have been baptized, minors run the risk of being shunned. Again, some opponents may have told the judge that this is not rare but among his numerous witnesses he found only one woman, now 40, who was disfellowshipped for a sexual offense and shunned as a minor, when she was 14, thus 26 years ago. She testifies that after a "short time" she was allowed to return to the fold by writing a "letter of regret" and attending a "short meeting." There is simply no evidence that disfellowshipping minors, with the consequence that they are shunned (but not by cohabiting relatives), is more than a rare occurrence.

It may be objected that a rare injustice would be an injustice, nonetheless. The answer is that, as the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) stated in cases about the dissolution of organizations of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia in in 2010 (Jehovah's Witnesses of Moscow and Others v. Russia) and 2022 (Taganrog LRO and Others v. Russia), denial or cancellation of registration of a religious organization is a serious measure with dramatic consequences for its members that states can adopt only in case of frequent and obvious crimes or misdemeanors. Shunning minors is not frequent, and the "principle of proportionality" between the fact and the sanction mentioned by the ECHR in its decisions about Russia would not be respected even if this was a crime.

But is it a crime? The judge himself admits that Jehovah's Witnesses, in good faith, perceive shunning as a "loving and meaningful arrangement," a painful medicine (painful, it should be added, for those who shun and not only for those who are shunned) that in many cases helps restoring family harmony and morality, as those shunned end up understanding their mistakes and repenting.

According to the decision, the violation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child would be in the fact that to minors, just as to adults, would be denied the freedom to "opt out" of the organization. Afraid of being shunned, minors who would want to quit in the end are dissuaded from leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses, which the judge thinks violates their right to change their religious affiliations. However, if the minors are mature enough to understand their obligations when they are baptized—and no evidence has been offered that this is not the case—they are aware of the exit costs just as the adults are. It is also false that a young boy or girl does not have experience of exit costs: he may decide to break a relation with a boyfriend or a girlfriend, quit a group of friends, leave a sport club, in extreme cases even leave the family and go live elsewhere. All these experiences have painful exit costs.

The decision argues that, because youth are especially fragile, the experience of shunning is more traumatic for them. This is possible, but youths also have greater flexibility in socialization than adults. Young Jehovah's Witnesses attend public schools, where after disfellowshipping they can continue to attend or newly enter into circles of friends who are not part of their former religion. The judge insists on the pain of not being able to communicate with grandparents who are Jehovah's Witnesses. However, grandparents may cut ties with their children and grandchildren for a variety of reasons, none of which courts of law can really correct. And even outside the Jehovah's Witnesses, minors who do something that is perceived by their relatives as a betrayal of the family or an expression of moral corruption may find themselves, for all practical purposes, "shunned."

It is difficult to disagree with professor of religious history, [Dag Øistein Endsjø](#), who told the leading Norwegian Christian daily newspaper "Vårt Land" that the verdict is against numerous decisions rendered in other countries, as well as against the case law of the European Court of Human Rights where it would have limited chances to survive. It is also against simple logic. Perhaps a higher Norwegian court will acknowledge it even before the court in Strasbourg.

Jehovah's Witnesses go to trial against Norway after state registration is revoked

'It's certainly the most important trial about a religious freedom issue in Norway in decades,' said Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers.

[Religion News Service](#) (16.01.2024) With its [recognition of more than 700](#) registered faith communities, Norway is often admired as a bastion of religious freedom. But after Norway deregistered the Jehovah's Witnesses last year, some human rights experts say that reputation could be in question. Now, the Jehovah's Witnesses of Norway are suing the state for revoking their national registration and withholding state funds. According

to Jehovah's Witnesses, they are the first religious group to lose their national registration in Norway.

The trial, which began Jan. 8, will determine whether some practices of the Jehovah's Witnesses violate Norway's Religious Communities Act or whether withdrawing the Jehovah's Witnesses' registration violates their right to freedom of religion and freedom of association, as guaranteed in the European Convention on Human Rights.

"It's certainly the most important trial about a religious freedom issue in Norway in decades," Willy Fautré, director of the Brussels-based organization [Human Rights Without Frontiers](#), told Religion News Service.

In January 2022, Valgerd Svarstad Haugland, the county governor of Oslo and Viken, in Norway, denied Jehovah's Witnesses state grants for the year 2021 in response to concerns about what she perceived as exclusionary practices. The Jehovah's Witnesses had received the grants, which currently amount to around \$1.5 million annually, for three decades. These funds are typically used for international disaster relief work and supporting religious activity in Norway, including translating literature and building kingdom halls, according to Jørgen Pedersen, spokesperson for Jehovah's Witnesses in Norway.

In an [announcement](#) originally written in Norwegian, the county governor of Oslo and Viken claimed that Jehovah's Witnesses are forbidden to contact disfellowshipped members, as well as people who voluntarily dissociate, which can hinder a person's ability to freely withdraw from the group. She also argued that Jehovah's Witnesses may disfellowship children who have chosen to be baptized if they break the religious community's rules, a practice she said constituted "negative social control" and violated children's rights. These practices, the county governor argued, defy Norway's Religious Communities Act. "We have assessed the offenses as systematic and intentional, and have therefore chosen to refuse grants," the press release said.

In an email to RNS, Jehovah's Witnesses spokesperson Jarrod Lopes said Witnesses only disfellowship an unrepentant member who "makes a practice" of serious violations of "the Bible's moral code." Even then, Lopes added, Jehovah's Witnesses don't force members to limit or cease association with former congregants, whether they've been disfellowshipped or withdrawn voluntarily — that's up to individuals. "Congregation elders do not police the personal lives of congregants, nor do they exercise control over the faith of individual Jehovah's Witnesses," wrote Lopes.

Pedersen added that the serious sins that might lead to disfellowship include manslaughter, adultery and drug use. He said a congregation will always try to help an individual restore their relationship with God, but if the problem persists, Jehovah's Witnesses feel compelled to respect the entire Bible, including instructions to not associate with unrepentant sinners, such as 1 Corinthians 5:11.

Though the Witnesses appealed the county governor's decision, in September 2022 the Ministry for Children and Families upheld the ruling. In October that same year, the county governor said in a [press release](#) that unless Jehovah's Witnesses would "rectify the conditions that led to the refusal of state subsidies," they would lose registration, which they did a few months later, in December. Without its national registration, Jehovah's Witnesses cannot perform marriages, and they lose entitlement to government grants.

The Jehovah's Witnesses of Norway filed two lawsuits against the state in December 2022: one challenging the denial of state grants and another challenging their loss of registration. Those lawsuits have since been combined. Though the Oslo District Court

initially granted the Jehovah's Witnesses an injunction that suspended their deregistration until that case was argued, the Ministry challenged the injunction, and in April 2023, the court removed it.

As the trial plays out at the District Court of Oslo, Jason Wise, an attorney who is acting as a consultant on the case for the legal team representing the Jehovah's Witnesses in Norway, said part of the Witnesses' argument is that there is no evidence of harm and that it's not the place of the state to interpret religious texts. The state continues to contend that the Jehovah's Witnesses' practices are in conflict with the Religious Communities Act, particularly, they claim, by exposing children to psychological violence.

Since 2022, Jehovah's Witnesses have reported an increase in vandalism, harassment and physical assaults in Norway. In September 2022, two Jehovah's Witnesses in Harstad, Norway, reported that a man screamed at them and repeatedly attempted to hit one of them. That same month, a man in Kristiansand, Norway, reportedly set a Jehovah's Witnesses mobile display car on fire, and a month later, someone attempted to set fire to a Jehovah's Witnesses meeting place in Fauske, Norway.

"What we see now is that the state of Norway is taking a look at my beliefs, saying, we don't like that, we don't like that," said Pedersen. Asking Jehovah's Witnesses to change their beliefs, he said, is a "violation of my integrity as a person, as a religious person, as a person with a conscience. That's the core issue of this case."

Norway isn't the only place where Jehovah's Witnesses' practices have been under scrutiny. In December, the Belgian Court of Cassation — the highest court in the Belgian judiciary — [rejected an appeal](#) of a lower court's decision, ruling in favor of Jehovah's Witnesses' right to avoid contact with former members.

"Norway is just the tip of another phenomenon. That is a source of concern, because we see that there are more and more attempts in Europe by state institutions to interfere and intrude into the teachings and practices of religious groups, which is forbidden by the European Convention," said Fautré. "The risk is they would open the door to more court cases against other religious groups."

A trial about the State's intrusion into religious beliefs

Willy Fautré, Director of Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (08.01.2024) - From 8 to 19 January 2024, the District Court of Oslo will examine the de-registration case of Jehovah's Witnesses on the grounds of their exclusion policy of members, also named disfellowshipping.

The case follows the government's denial of the Witnesses' application for state grants in 2021, which they had received for 30 years. These subsidies are not "gifts" but allocations provided for by the Norwegian Constitution and laws to respect the principle of equality between religious communities, whatever their size, since the Church of Norway (Lutheran) is supported by taxpayers' money.

A timeline in short

On 27 January 2022, the County Governor (Statsforvalteren) for Oslo and Viken, Ms. Valgerd Svarstad-Haugland, issued [an administrative decision](#) denying the state subsidy for the year 2021 to Jehovah's Witnesses.

The starting point of the legal saga was a report addressed to the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs by Prof. Rolf Furuli, a professor emeritus of Semitic languages at the University of Oslo and a disfellowshipped Jehovah's Witness himself, in connection with the exclusion and expulsion policy of members. The question was raised about how the report should be assessed with regard to the registration of and state subsidies to the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Noteworthy is that Prof. Furuli supported a first [decision in August 2021 by a Norwegian court](#) "annulling" an ecclesiastical decision where the Jehovah's Witnesses disfellowshipped one of their female members, Gry Helen Nygård. However, this decision was reversed on 9 July 2021 by the Borgarting Court of Appeal and on 3 May 2022 by [the Supreme Court of Norway](#) with a unanimous decision (5-0). Nygård then took her case to [the European Court of Human Rights \(ECHR\)](#), which rejected her complaint without giving any further reason, which is common when the ECHR regards complaints as clearly unfounded.

Nygård has also taken her case to a different court, the media, and has found a sympathetic ear from people hostile to Jehovah's Witnesses.

On 25 October 2022, the County Governor of Oslo and Viken, Ms. Valgerd Svarstad-Haugland, demanded via letter that Jehovah's Witnesses change their religious beliefs and practices, otherwise they would lose their registration. In her letter, she did not refer to any court decisions or complaints to the police, child welfare authorities, or other relevant authorities. The Witnesses proposed to meet her but she declined their request.

On 22 December 2022, the County Governor revoked their registration as a religious community.

On 30 December 2022, Oslo District Court granted Jehovah's Witnesses a temporary injunction suspending the County Governor's decision and pending litigation.

On 26 April 2023, the District Court lifted the injunction in response to a request by the Ministry of Children and Families. The decision was appealed.

On 30 June 2023, the Borgarting Court of Appeal dismissed the appeal on technical grounds.

What are and can be the consequences of the de-registration?

News reports about the State revoking the Witnesses' registration stigmatize the nearly 12,000 Jehovah's Witnesses of Norway.

The negative media coverage has led to considerable increase in verbal abuse, physical assaults, as well as vandalism of places of worship (e.g., offensive graffiti, arson).

The community is losing the State's recognition of their religious marriages as well as some \$1.6 million (USD) in government grants.

The State intrusion into the beliefs and practices of Jehovah's Witnesses that is being examined in Norway can have a very negative impact on other religious communities in Norway and other countries.

The ruling against that religious community "can have consequences for a whole range of other faiths," stated **Dag Øistein Endsjø, professor of Religious studies at the University of Oslo**, in an interview published in the newspaper [Vårt Land](#).

In an editorial, **Vebjørn Selbekk (editor-in-chief of the respected Norwegian Christian newspaper, *Dagen*)** expressed fear that the County Governor may go on and sanction other religious groups whose beliefs and practices she happens to disagree with. He regarded the decision as anti-democratic, and expressed the hope that the Jehovah's Witnesses will "emerge victorious from the upcoming court process." Noteworthy is that Mr. Selbekk is not a Jehovah's Witness and is [critical of their theology](#).

Monsignor Torbjørn Olsen, the [Secretary of the Catholic Norwegian Bishops' Conference](#), wrote in a [Norwegian media](#): "If the denial of registration stands, it may soon only be a matter of time before a number of other communities with 'incorrect' positions will be deregistered."

Last but not least, a collateral damage is also the [reaction of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#) whose spokesperson, Maria Zakharova, decried the hypocrisy of Norway which deregistered Jehovah's Witnesses, while criticizing Moscow at international forums for banning that same religious community. She also added that Russia's nationwide ban is hereby legitimized by the decision in Norway.
